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ABSTRACT

Two studies carried out by James Squire and Jesse Stuart explored processes used in reading the short story, ways of exploring student's processes, possibilities within the short story as a literary genre, and methods teachers can use. Squire's study showed that introspection and retrospection are useful in studying students' reading processes. In Stuart's study 89% of both higher and lower level readers did not perceive the main idea of the short story. In applying this research to the classroom, teachers must ask "how" and "why" questions so that students' means of arriving at an answer can be understood. Also, teachers should develop in their students an active rather than passive method of reading; students should ask themselves questions as they read such as, why was this title chosen? What is the writer's style? What do you learn about human behavior? What motivates the main characters? (Included are suggestions on how to let students build their own definition of the short story and how to teach sentence and paragraph writing using short stories.) (SRT)

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DID YOU REALLY READ THAT SHORT STORY?

C. D. Rogers

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DID YOU REALLY READ THAT SHORT STORY?

Once upon a time Guy de Maupassant, a master of the short story, wrote: "The public is composed of numerous groups who cry to us: 'Console me, amuse me, make me sad; make me sympathetic; make me dream, make me laugh; make me shudder; make me weep; make me think.'"

Does the short story make our public--our students we teach--shudder, dream, and think? Do our students read the short story so that they can weep and laugh and know what it means to be man? Do our students really read the short story? To promote affirmative answers is my objective.

We, therefore, explore:

1. processes used in reading the short story,
2. ways of exploring our student's processes,
3. possibilities within the short story as a literary genre, and
4. methods we the teacher can use.

Two studies directly exploring the processes of students reading the short story are briefly reviewed. The brevity does not allow citing research standards--from selections of the samples, through Kendall Coefficient of Concordances, Fisher's exact probabilities, or the "t' tests. Both studies met strict research standards.

At the University of California James Squire studied the responses to four short stories by 52 teenagers. The short stories read were those which could influence personal development of these teenagers. Through taped, one-hour interviews each teenager freely discussed ideas and feelings of which each was conscious as he read selections of the short stories. Each also responded at the end of reading the short story.

Thus Squire showed us again that we can study our student's reading processes through introspection (thinking aloud as he reads) and through retrospection (looking back and explaining his thoughts of which he was aware).

Among these 52 teenagers Squire's research revealed that

--few drew upon or related their own experiential backgrounds to the short story they read;

--sex differences did not significantly affect the overall pattern of reading;

--group tendencies were observed; so was considerable individual variation in reading the short story; and

--the quality of their individual interpretations of the short story seemed generally unrelated to their intelligence and reading ability (as measured by standardized tests).

[This reminds us what the standardized reading tests are not measuring: the comprehension of fiction. Usually nonfiction is used, and details, main ideas, a few inferences, and vocabulary are questioned.]

In addition to those major conclusions, the six areas of difficulty in reading the short story experienced by these 52 teenagers in Squire's sample alerts us. They are the same difficult areas my students experience:

1. inadequate implication of words,
2. reliance on stock responses,
3. expecting "everybody to live happily ever after,"
4. predetermined viewpoint,
5. erratic associations, and
6. determination to achieve absolute certainty in interpretation.

Are these six difficult areas those we must teach attentively?

The author of the short story used in the second study exploring the

reading processes was Jesse Stuart. Do you know him as a short story writer or perhaps as the poet who wrote:

> Hold on to April, never let her pass!
> Another year before she comes again
> To bring us wind as clean as polished glass
> And apple blossoms in soft silver rain.

Stuart's story "Love" has a rural Kentucky setting in which a young boy and his father grapple with the many facets of love in the death of a black snake, the reaction of its mate, and the meaning of life in nature. The fifth grade readability story met the criteria established for this study.

From an 11th grade class of 525, 28 students were grouped into high level readers and low level readers of this short story. Each of the 28 was interviewed for an hour involving introspective, retrospective, and structured responses. This approach can be adapted to the classroom by interviewing two students in front of the class. In this interview the class sees how and why the short story was interpreted by the students.

First ask all the students to read the short story. Then ask the student being interviewed this question:

Retrospective question--"I'm going to let you do most of the talking because the important thing is what you think and feel as you read this story. Would you think back to when you read the story? Try to tell me everything you thought and everything you felt as you read the story. Just go ahead and talk about the story."

Then the study required asking specific questions. We study thus the answers to get at processes.

--What are the main events in this story?
--How did you discover these main events?

--What is the main point of this story?

--How did you arrive at this conclusion?

--What do you think about the boy?

--Why? How do you know [illegible]t kind of person he is?

(Note the importance of "how do you know" and of the challenge "prove it."

Third introspection explores the processes. Ask the student to read aloud with this direction:

Introspective question--"Read each of these selections aloud and tell everything you think and feel when you read each selection."

What were some of the conclusions? First, no significant differences existed in the higher and the lower level readers in these 8 areas:

--in identifying the main characters,

--in understanding the reactions of the main character,

--in noticing attitudinal changes,

--in identifying the theme,

--in identifying the setting,

--in making personal application (A questionnaire was administered two days after each interview to examine integration of the reading experience into the student's life.)

--in understanding the solution to the problem posed.

Both groups spent much time concerned with description and with development of characterization when they read the short story. Furthermore 96.1% wanted to improve their reading of short stories.

The higher level readers were significantly better in their ability to

--grasp the implied meaning,

--understand the figurative language,

--see meaning in context,

--understand problems facing the characters,

--enrich his personal life by reading the story,

--grasp the main conflict,

--understand why the title was chosen,

--compare the story with previous experiences,
--see evidence of the author's experiences,
--grasp clues to the setting,
--sense the mood of the story,
--understand the author's viewpoint,
--understand finer points of characterization,
--see the main elements of the plot,
--analyze the writing techniques used, and
--obtain the supporting facts.

Eighty-nine percent of both groups missed the main idea. Most important for us as teachers is "How did you get the main idea?" Students responded that they saw clues from the title, reaction of the main character, through character study, and from facts given at the end of the story. Their wrong answers also revealed processes albeit malfunctioning processes. Some had interferring personal feelings and preconceived ideas about what to expect. For example a student said, "The reason that I decided that the main idea of the story was education is because of what I have read of Jesse Stuart before. All of his works are shot through with education." A second said, "I'm a pessimist. You give me a happy story, and I'll get something horrible out of it."

How do we use this in the classroom? First, students may give us the same answers to questions, right or wrong, and we are never aware of the myriad individual routes taken to arrive at that conclusion. Through "how" and "why" questions the individual routes are mapped.

Second, seek to develop an active rather than passive reading of the short story. The student should automatically ask the questions as he reads. If he asked, the questions he would read to recognize, for example, these minimum points:

1. Why is the title chosen?

2. What is the writer's style?

3. With what other stories does it compare?

4. What is the underlying idea?

5. What views of life, what interpretations, are here?

6. What do you learn about human behavior?

7. What is the main conflict, the subordinate conflicts, and how are they developed?

8. What motivates the main character?

9. How is the problem solved that faces the character?

10. What other solutions are available?

11. What necessary facts are used in the story?

12. What morals are illustrated?

13. What new words do you learn?

14. Is symbolism here? Identify and support.

15. What are the main incidents in the story?

16. What method is used to develop the story?

17. Who is telling the story? What changes would be made from another viewpoint?

18. What reveals possible autobiographical elements in the author's writing?

19. What emotions are involved?

20. Who are the characters? What is his role in the story?

21. What is the setting?

22. What characteristics do any of these characters share with other literary characters?

23. What is the dominating short story element?

24. What is the time element involved?

25. With what method is the story begun, ended?

The application of the above is not to develop support for this student's argument: "I could get the answers if you asked me all the questions." Archibald MacLeish said it this way: "We have learned the answers, all the answers. It is the question that we do not know." Therefore in class start with a more simple short story. Instructions to the student include:

1. Read this story as you ordinarily read a short story.

2. (Following the unhurried reading) What did you get from reading this short story? Write in essay form of every aspect of which you were aware while reading.

3. (Again allowing unhurried answering) Did you really read that short story? Score your answers: a. Keep your score in the margin opposite your essay. b. Read slowly the 25 questions listed above. Locate answers you have written to these questions. c. If anywhere you have completely or in part answered the question, record four points. We are not concerned with right or wrong at this time, rather with your awareness of the complexity of the reading act. d. Allow four points only for each item. For example, if your answer includes an awareness of characterization, of plot, of the setting, (although you wrote many pages) your score is still 12. e. Total the points you have given yourself. One hundred points are possible. (An average of 36.4 was made by 110 university freshmen.)

4. Did you really read that short story?

We can also teach the short story as the short story writers suggest. Jesse Stuart was a teacher too. He said teach the short story this way:

1. Assign the short story to be read before class. Make allowance for those who do not read it before class.

2. Read the story paragraph by paragraph in class. Be in no hurry. Feel free to express opinions, favorable or unfavorable.

3. Discuss the author, the type of man he is, and the reasons he writes a short story of this type.

4. Connect the setting the characters with the author's background.

5. Talk about the words he has used.

6. Discuss the story in general.

7. Do not have a skeleton to analyze the story. Do not take it apart and put it together again.

8. Read several stories. Compare the short stories of certain authors. Each student makes his own choice of who is greater.

9. Get off into a discussion of Edgar Allan Poe if the interest flows that way. Find all the information in the library on Poe.

10. Go back to the beginning of our literature in America [or your literature in Ireland] and go over the early giants.

11. Link the writers together up to the present time.

12. Relax. Take it easy. Laugh in class. "We read the short story for enjoyment and with this enjoyment comes knowledge."

13. Note the different kind of stories in different periods, the air-tight plot of O'Henry, the loose inner plot of modern short stories.

14. Go in for little details and discuss these with laughter and heated arguments.

15. Sum up your adventures in reading short stories at the end of the school year.

Wasn't Stuart saying between the lines to us the teacher:

Little things matter big.

It takes courage in the classroom to be open and vulnerable.

"There are some things which cannot be learned quickly, and time, which is all we have, must be paid heavily for their acquiring." (Ernest Hemingway).

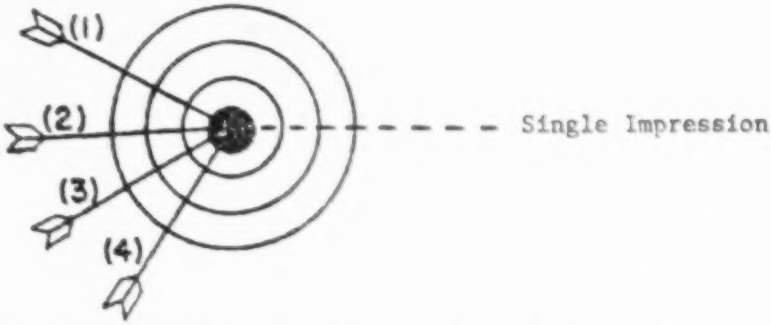
Stuart said on the line he did not like dissecting. Sean O'Faolain in The Short Story said the same: "I have no great liking for the dissecting room--if there is no other way it must be done."

Let us plunge in. What is a short story? We know the story is consciously made to be the result of conscious craftsmanship and skill. Is it the slice of life of Chekhov, the surprise ending of Maupaussant and O'Henry, the tale of unified effect of Edgar Poe, the epiphany that reveals the true nature of characters of events of James Joyce, or the organic form organized around a significant moment in time when a major change or revelation takes place in a character's life of Frank O'Connor?

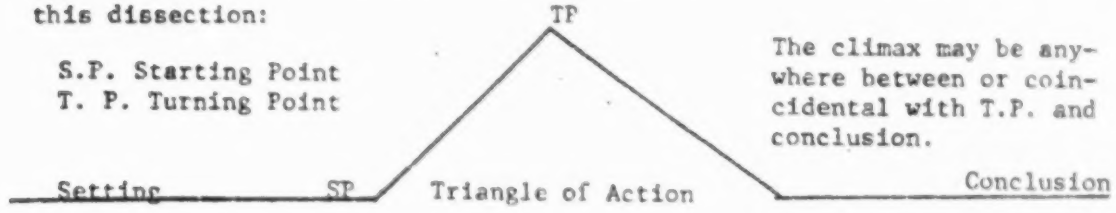
Even this definition would cause argument among us: "The short story is a fictional narrative that is short." Let our students build a definition from stories from the Old Testament through the symbolic literary "Once upon a times." Assigned groups can read different authors, define the short story as it fits that author, and then meet in the larger group and reconcile elements in the definitions. Each group can support its arguments with examples from its readings.

Assume we study Poe whose "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" were the most familiar short stories to the eleventh graders in the study previously cited. The class begins with pulling the blackout curtains, playing haunting music (which a student supplies), and then listening to a record of "The Tell-Tale Heart" with its sound effects. Dissection of the story elements takes the form of an archery target, wherein plot, characters, setting, and style aim for a single impression, Poe's unified effect. The students feather the four arrows with details from one of Poe's stories. How do you know the effect? The "how" is in the evidence on the arrow shafts:

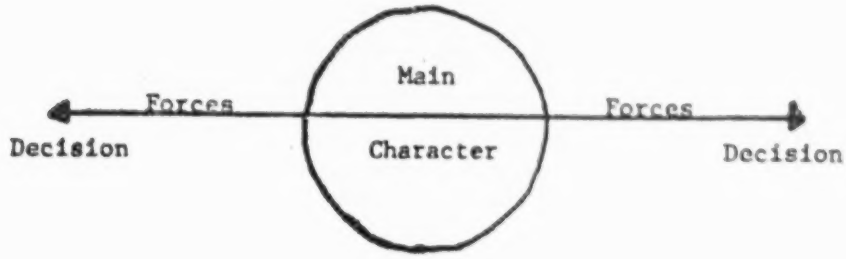
(1) Plot
(2) Characters
(3) Setting
(4) Style



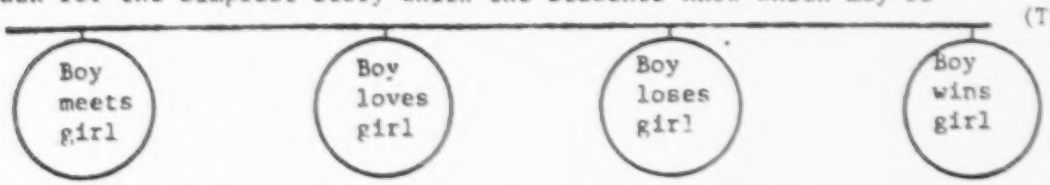
For tightly structured stories, such as by Poe, teachers have used this dissection:



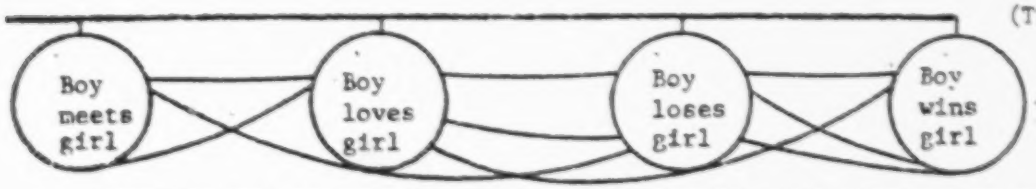
Assume the story is by Frank O'Connor in which main characters usually convey an intense awareness of human loneliness. In "Judas" O'Connor's main character is torn in making a decision. This is a possible dissection:



A series of closely linked episodes making a short story could be diagramed as follows. First make a straight line representing time. Then ask for the simplest story which the students know which may be



Evolve that these four events are linked together only in that they form a series. Students identify events leading to each episode until emerges



Sentence and paragraph writing can be taught with short story patterns. Morley Callaghan and Ernest Hemingway, for example, struggled years honing a writing style. We can learn "tricks of the trade" from writers who have printed the trail. The example used is the first two sentences of John Steinbeck's story "Flight." Here a Spanish American boy who seeks to be a man finds the meaning to existence in that flight through the mountains to his becoming. This is the way Steinbeck created setting; this is the way a student created setting with Steinbeck's pattern:

Steinbeck's "Flight"	Student's "My Room"
About fifteen miles	Exactly four feet
below Monterey	from the floor,
on the wild coast,	in red cartons,
the Torres family had their farm, a	we kept our Pepsi bottles, neatly
few sloping acres	arranged
above a cliff	above the fireplace
that dropped	that was framed
to the brown reefs	by the mantelpiece

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and to the hissing white waters
of the ocean.
Behind the farm
the stone mountains stood up
against the sky

and by the faded flowered carpet
on the floor.
Behind the bottles
a fraternity banner stood out
against the wall.

After the exercise in structural patterning, look at his use of words: sloped and dropped to hissing waters--but stood up against the sky. How do you know Steinbeck's attitude toward man? How do you know the main idea? Of what are you aware as you read this story?

"Did you really read that short story?"

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